



Bill Mitchell, Daily Sun

## Serving in God's Houses

Mike Stramiello with his wife Carol, center, of the Village of Sabal Chase, lead a group prayer while volunteering at the Caring Hands Food Pantry on Tuesday in Wildwood.

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**Serving in God's Houses** By BROOKE AUSTILL, Daily Sun Staff Writer

Greg Dodge keeps on the move each week, attending four churches.

Whether he's preparing an audio-visual presentation for a service at New Covenant United Methodist or attending a Bible study at First Baptist at The Villages, Dodge can be found in one of God's local houses of worship five days a week.

"The goal is to be at the center of God's will," said Dodge, of the Village of Buttonwood. "It doesn't matter if it's at the pulpit or teaching, I'm just trying to stay near to God."

In The Villages, where the faithful have dozens of churches to choose from and a huge number of ministries where they can volunteer, residents can find themselves busy in more than one ministry, often at multiple churches.

New Covenant Pastor Harold Hendren said serving in multiple churches is a trend in this active and caring community.

"People, especially in our community, really enjoy being active and serving other people," he said.

But it's not just in The Villages.

A 2009 Pew Research Center study found that a large number of Americans engage in multiple religious customs and practices, often mixing elements of diverse traditions.

The study revealed that 35 percent of Americans say they regularly or occasionally attended religious services at more than one place. About one-in-four adults said they attended services of at least one faith other than their own.

Hendren said there's a melting pot of people in all denominations involved at his church.

"It's not so much about the denomination, but about the connection and comfort they feel where they are serving," he said.

The Daily Sun talked with a few local residents about their experiences at multiple churches.

### **Greg Dodge**

Among those who attend religious services at least once a week, nearly four-in-10 people told Pew they attended at multiple places and nearly three-in-10 went to services outside their own faith.

This traveling form of spiritual engagement is true for Dodge.

The Village of Buttonwood man starts his week off with Sunday service and Bible study at New Song Community Church, where he's also participating in an apprenticeship to become a pastor.

Mondays call for an evening Bible study at First Baptist Church at The Villages.

On Wednesdays, Dodge makes his way to Wildwood United Methodist Church, where he assists in leadership of the Celebrate Recovery program.

For Dodge, the phrase "Thank God it's Friday" is observed with assistance of Celebrate Recovery at New Covenant.

Before the day of 'rest,' Dodge ends his cycle of service by compiling audio and visual presentations for New Covenant's Saturday evening service.

A recovering alcoholic for 17 years, Dodge said the experience transformed him to be the Lord's servant that he is today.

Dodge said he has a hunger to participate in Christ-centered activities, and finding ministries to serve in just fell into place.

"Someone would just ask me, 'Do you want to help?' he said. "I was called to serve."

He's not sure what the future holds as far as his pastoral career, but he knows that Christians working together is what's important.

"When Christians unite together, it's the whole body of Christ," he said. "It doesn't matter what church we're at, as long as we're doing God's work."

### **Mike and Carol Stramiello**

Mike and Carol Stramiello see themselves as God's hands and feet.

The Village of Sabal Chase residents attend New Covenant worship services, volunteer at the church's thrift store, Bargains and Blessings, as well as Helping Hands, an outreach ministry that refurbishes used mobile homes for area families in need.

Carol's work for Helping Hands includes talking with the families and guiding them throughout their new home process.

Mike builds porches and decks at the homes, lays drywall and installs kitchen appliances.

But the Stramiellos don't stop at the Methodist church.

Once a week, the couple heads over to First Baptist Church of Wildwood to volunteer at its food pantry, Caring Hands.

Whether Mike is packing meat and dairy products into bags or Carol is stacking food onto supply shelves, it's no secret where the two can be found every Tuesday from 9 a.m. to noon.

In 2009, the couple, along with a few friends, were asked to seek and serve in some kind of outreach ministry.

The original plan was to volunteer at the Wildwood Food Pantry, which is ran through Wildwood UMC, but other church members had the same idea.

"Everyone wanted to volunteer at the pantry," Mike said. "So many people signed up that they couldn't take anymore volunteers."

So eight parishioners, including Mike and Carol, started their 40-day outreach at Caring Hands. Six years later, the Stramiellos are still serving the Lord by serving there.

Many of the volunteers are from different denominations — Methodist to Baptist and even Jewish, Carol said.

What they have in common is a desire to help others, Mike said.

"When we get to heaven, God's not going to ask, 'Were you Methodist, Catholic or Baptist?'" he said. "We're just serving his people."

### **Rick Fabling**

For Rick Fabling, it's all about 2.

Every day, the Village of Winifred resident wears gold pins on either side of his collar: the numeral on one side and a cross on the other.

"That's the most important number in the whole wide world," he said. "It's me and Jesus."

The unique pin helps him strike up conversations with strangers.

"People always ask, 'What's that two for?'" he said. "I got 'em, just like that."

But his evangelizing doesn't stop with wardrobe accessories.

Fabling attends both St. Timothy Roman Catholic Church and New Covenant.

Although he spends much of his spiritual serving life at the Methodist church, Fabin said he'll never forget the Catholic faith he was brought up in.

Fabin attends Mass at St. Timothy on Saturday and worship service at New Covenant Sunday.

He can be found at one of his church homes six days a week.

Rick and his wife, Linda, chair the hospitality ministry at New Covenant and also volunteer in the one dozen umbrella ministries under the hospitality ministry, including ushering during services.

Rick is also a member of the men's ministry team, which organizes conferences and retreats.

He also leads two small groups, including men's Bible study, prepares and attends the men's prayer breakfast every Tuesday, and plays a round or two of golf with the men's church league.

His time at the Methodist church doesn't affect his dedication to his Catholic roots.

"I would never, never give up my Catholic faith," he said. "It's close to my heart."

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